Hurras al-Din

Name: Hurras al-Din

Type of Organization:

- Non-state actor
- religious
- terrorist
- national
- violent

Ideologies and Affiliations:

- Jihadist
- pan-Islamist
- Salafist
- Sunni
- takfiri

Place of Origin:

Syria

Year of Origin:

February 28, 2018

Founder(s):

Khaled al-Aruri, Samir Hijazi, Sami al-Oraidi

Places of Operation:

Syria

Overview

Executive Summary:

Hurras al-Din (HaD) was formed on February 27, 2018, by a merger of seven hardline Syrian rebel factions.[1] Ten more minor rebel factions joined the group in the months following its formation, all with a history of ideological and leadership ties to al-Qaeda.[2] At least half of the group's 700-2,500 members are foreigners.[3] HaD is avowedly loyal to al-Qaeda and its leadership is dominated by non-Syrian al-Qaeda veterans.[4] HaD's leadership is split along two ideological currents: one following the teachings of al-Qaeda scholar Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and the other following the Libyan cleric Jamal Ibrahim Ashityawee al-Musratti.[5] Both currents, however, view al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri as their "defining authority."[6]

Despite its small size, HaD claims to have carried out over 200 attacks in Syria's Idlib, Latakia, Hama, and Aleppo provinces, often in conjunction with other Syrian rebel factions.[7] The group holds no territory and largely uses small arms and light weapons such as mortars and technicals in its raids of Syrian regime positions.[8] While HaD's core leadership and fighters are mostly defectors from the former Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate the Nusra Front, now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the two groups have worked together to carry out combat operations against the Syrian regime.[9]

On September 10, 2019, the United States listed HaD and its founding leader, Samir Hijazi, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.[10] These listings came just 10 days after the U.S. executed its third airstrike in two months against the organization in Syria's Idlib province.[11] On June 14, 2020, the United States reportedly carried out a fourth targeted airstrike on the group, killing its overall leader Khaled al-Aruri (a.k.a. Abu al-Qasim al-Urduni) and another senior commander Bilal al Sanaani.[12] However, a spokesman for the U.S.-led international coalition stated that

the coalition "has not conducted any airstrikes in northwestern Syria in recent weeks."[13] U.S. officials believe that, given enough freedom to plan and prepare, HaD will carry out attacks against American interests domestically and abroad.[14]

The United States continued to carry out airstrikes against HaD members in the second half of 2020. On September 15, 2020, the U.S. launched a drone strike in Idlib, targeting and killing Sayyaf al-Tunsi, a former HaD leader. Al-Tunsi was targeted due to his alleged responsibility for the 2015 massacre of 20 Druze villagers in Idlib province when HaD was operating under the banner of the Nusra Front. Additionally, al-Tunsi was allegedly a senior planner of al-Qaeda attacks against the West. U.S. military officials believe al-Tunsi's death will disrupt the operational capacities of HaD.[15]

Additionally, in mid-2020, the ruling rebel faction in Idlib, HTS, began cracking down on HaD leadership and rank and file. Dozens of senior and mid-level leaders were arrested or killed, and the group was militarily expelled from its strongholds in the governorate.[16] Since then, HaD has been largely powerless, unable to conduct attacks, rebuild, or operate freely in northwest Syria.[17]

Doctrine:

The United Nations assesses that al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is the "defining authority" for HaD and that the group has a "more international outlook" compared to most other opposition groups in Syria, which have directed their efforts against each other and the Syrian regime.[18] International Crisis Group profile of HaD states the group "embraces an uncompromising global jihadist worldview."[19] The hardline faction of HaD leaders follow the ideological outlook of al-Qaeda–linked scholar Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of the most prominent Salafist figures worldwide.[20] According to Syrian-based Islamist figures, HaD leaders have repeatedly expressed a desire to conduct external attacks against the United States.[21]

Organizational Structure:

In mid-2019, analysts estimated that HaD consisted of 16 local factions that together comprise between 700 and 2,500 fighters, half of whom were foreigners.[22] HaD foreign fighters come from most Middle Eastern and North African countries, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria, as well as from Central Asia.[23] The group's factions operate in Aleppo, Latakia, Idlib, and north Hama. The group has also allied itself with other Syrian militants for specific operations. These partners have ranged from small pro-al-Qaeda groups like Jabhat Ansar al-Din and Jamaat Ansar al-Islam to major local factions like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.[24]

In October 2018, HaD allied with HTS and pro-al-Qaeda groups Ansar al-Din and Jamaat Ansar al-Islam to form the Incite the Believers *(Wa-Hardh al-Muminin*) Operations Room.[25] However, as HTS began to assert its power in northern Syria through seizing territory from rival rebel groups, on June 12, 2020, HaD formed a new operations room alongside four other small, hardline militant groups in Idlib. The new operations room is called "Be Steadfast" and includes the previous HaD operations room "Incite the Believers." In 2020, HTS began cracking down on HaD and has arrested many of its leaders.[26]

Syrian activists have accused HaD is of running four secret detention centers where it holds at least 113 prisoners, including local aid workers.[27]

Financing:

Despite the harsh rhetoric between the leaderships of HTS and HaD, the former does provide some limited material support to the group, especially when the two groups participate in joint combat operations.[28] HaD also raises funds through online campaigns, stating that "money is the backbone of jihad, and the abilities of the mujahedin would be weakened without it."[29] Prospective donors are given details for bank accounts in which they can deposit funds.[30]

Recruitment:

Most of HaD's members appears to be defected fighters from other Syrian rebel factions, including a large percentage of foreign fighters dissatisfied with the less-hardline ideology they believe HTS has adopted.[31]

HaD also conducts extensive outreach programs, pushing its ideology on locals and other militants through Friday sermons, youth lectures, public *dawa* (outreach) forums, *dawa* tours, cultural courses, and hospital visits.[32]

Training:

HaD operates at least four military-training camps in the greater Idlib area, three of which are named after prominent al-Qaeda loyalists who died in Syria: Abu Khalad al-Muhandis, Shaykh Abu Firas al-Suri, and Shaykh Abu Islam.[33]

Also Known As:

- Al-Qaida in Syria[34]
- AQ-S[35]
- Guardians of Religion[36]
- Hurras al-Deen[37]
- Tandhim Hurras al-Deen[38]
- Tanzim Hurras al-Din[39]
- Sham al-Ribat[40]

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Key Leaders

Khaled al-Aruri (a.k.a. Abu al-Qasim al-Urduni)

Overall leader, deceased

Faruq al-Suri a.k.a. Samir Hijazi

Leader

Sami al-Uraydi

Shura Council member

Bilal Khuraysat (a.k.a. Abu Hudhayfah al-Urduni, a.k.a. Abu Khadija al-Urduni)

Shura Council member, deceased

Faraj Ahmad Nanaa

Shura Council member

Abu Abd al-Karim al-Masri

Senior leader

Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Makki

Senior leader, Shura Council member

Abu al-Bara' al-Tunisi

Senior religious figure

Iyad Nazmi Salih Khalil (a.k.a. Abu Julaybib al-Urduni)

Unidentified role, deceased

Abu Omar al-Tunsi

Sharia judge, deceased

Abu Thar al-Masri

Senior figure, deceased

Abu Yahia al-Jaza'aeri

Senior figure, deceased

Abu Dujanah al-Tunissi

Senior figure, deceased

Abu Khalad al-Muhandis (a.k.a. Sari Shihab)

Senior figure, deceased

Bilal al Sanaani

Senior commander, deceased

Mohammed Khattab (a.k.a. Abu Adnan al-Homsi)

Chief of military logisitics (deceased)

Abu Hamzah al Yemeni

Senior leader, deceased

Sayyaf al-Tunsi

Senior leader, deceased

Hurras al-Din

History:

- **April 11, 2023:** The U.S. Department of State designates HaD senior leader, Sami al-Uraydi as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT).
  The State Department's Rewards for Justice program first offered a $5 million reward for information leading to the capture of al-Uraydi in September 2019. According to Rewards for Justice, al-Uraydi was previously involved in terrorist plots against the U.S. and Israel and is currently a member of HaD's shura, the senior decision-making body. Source: "Terrorist Designation of Hurras al-Din Leader," U.S. Department of State, April 11, 2023, https://www.state.gov/terrorist-designation-of-hurras-al-din-leader/, "Sami al-Uraydi," Rewards for Justice, https://rewardsforjustice.net/rewards/sami-al-uraydi/.

- **February 24, 2023:** The U.S.-led international coalition launches a drone strike, killing a senior HaD leader in Mashhad Rohin, north of Idlib.
  The senior operative, Abu Obeida al-Iraqi was riding a motorcycle with another person when he was struck and killed. Source: "Spotlight on Global Jihad (February 23 – March 1, 2023)," The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, March 3, 2023, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/spotlight-on-global-jihad-february-23-march-1-2023/."Spotlight on Global Jihad (February 23 – March 1, 2023)," The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, March 3, 2023, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/spotlight-on-global-jihad-february-23-march-1-2023/.

- **February 14, 2023:** According to media sources, HaD is receiving "direct instructions" from de facto al-Qaeda leader Saif al-Adel.
  Adel, who has not been officially confirmed as the successor of late al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, has been operating as the chief leader of the terror group. Source: Jeff Seldin, "New Al-Qaida Leader Commanding from Iran," Voice of America, February 14, 2023, https://www.voanews.com/a/new-al-qaida-leader-commanding-from-iran-/6962758.html.

- **June 27, 2022:** U.S. forces launch an airstrike that kills Abu Hamzah al Yemeni, a senior HaD leader, in Idlib, Syria.
  Yemeni was reportedly riding alone on a motorcycle at the time of the strike. Source: Matt Seyler, "US forces kill senior terrorist leader in Syria," ABC News, June 27, 2022, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-forces-kill-senior-terrorist-leader-syria/story?id=85815330.

- **May 30, 2022:** The Council of the European Union adds HaD, as well as HaD leader Faruq al-Suri and religious leader Sami al-Oraidi to the EU sanctions list.
  Source: "EU fight against terrorism: one group and two individuals added to the EU sanctions list," Council of the European Union, May 30, 2022, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/05/30/eu-fight-against-terrorism-one-group-and-two-individuals-added-to-the-eu-sanctions-list/.

- **September 21, 2021:** HTS members refuse calls from HaD members to resolve their differences through sharia arbitration.
  Given HTS's rejection of HaD's pleas, HaD leader Abu Humam al-Shami releases a statement asking HTS to consider "an independent judiciary that both parties agree on to look into the conditions of our prisoners, resolve the differences, settle the status of properties and assets they confiscated, and [stop] the ongoing arrests against the Mujahideen." However, HTS shura council members, Mazhar al-Wais and Abu Marieh Qahtani refuse HaD's offer for reconciliation. Source: Khaled al-Khateb, "Syrian jihadist group won't reconcile with al-Qaeda affiliate in Idlib," Al-Monitor, September 29, 2021, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/syrian-jihadist-group-wont-reconcile-al-qaeda-affiliate-idlib#ixzz7VpNBrOmy.

- HTS members continue a campaign of wide-scale arrests against prominent members of HaD.
  On February 10, HTS arrests Abu Abdul Rahman al-Ourdouni, a sharia leader of HaD in western Idlib, and on February 20, HTS arrests Abu Abdullah al-Souri, HaD's leader in Aleppo, at his residence in Idlib. The arrests are allegedly a campaign to wekean HaD and to eventually eliminate the group. Source: Khaled al-Khateb, "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham intensifies campaign against al-Qaeda affiliate in Idlib," Al-Monitor, February 25, 2021, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/syria-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-arrest-weaken.html#ixzz7VpLntBfl.

- **October 5, 2020:** HTS members arrest Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Makki, a leader in HaD in Idlib, Syria.
  Al-Makki is a member of the Shura Council of HaD. The arrest comes amidst HTS's crackdown on HaD members in order to assert their de facto authority in northwestern Syria. Sources: Sultan al-Kanj, "Syrian extremist group in Idlib breaks with jihadist ideologue," Al-Monitor, October 21, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/10/syria-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-relations-al-qaeda-jihadis.html#ixzz6cwLNR8Kp; Abdul Rahman Khader, "The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham arrests a Saudi leader of the "Guardians of Religion" organization," Al Araby, October 5, 2020, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%22%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%22-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84-%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%22%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%22?amp.

- **September 15, 2020:** The U.S. launches a drone strike in Idlib, targeting and killing Sayyaf al-Tunsi, a former HaD leader.
  Al-Tunsi was targeted due to his alleged responsibility for the 2015 massacre of 20 Druze villagers in Idlib province when HaD was operating under the banner of the Nusra Front. Additionally, al-Tunsi was allegedly a senior planner of al-Qaeda attacks against the West. U.S. military officials believe al-Tunsi's death will disrupt the operational capacities of HaD. Sources: "Syria Drone Strike Kills Top Tunisian Jihadist Sayyaf al-Tunsi," Defense Post, September 15, 2020, https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/09/15/drone-strike-kills-al-tunsi/; Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Commandos Use Secretive Missiles to Kill Qaeda Leaders in Syria," *New York Times*, September 24, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/24/us/politics/missiles-al-qaeda-syria.html.

- **June 24, 2020:** A U.S. airstrike kills HaD chief of military logisitics, Mohammed Khattab (a.k.a. Abu Adnan al-Homsi).
  Source: Charles Lister, "Twenty Years After 9/11: The Fight for Supremacy in Northwest Syria and the Implications for Global Jihad," Counter Terrorism Center, September 2021, 55, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-fight-for-supremacy-in-northwest-syria-and-the-implications-for-global-jihad/.

- **June 14, 2020:** A U.S. airstrike in northern Syria targets and kills Khaled al-Aruri, the group's overall leader, and senior commander Bilal al Sanaani.
  Source: Thomas Joscelyn, "U.S. reportedly targets 2 senior al Qaeda figures in airstrike in Syria," Long War Journal, June 14, 2020, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/06/u-s-reportedly-targets-2-senior-al-qaeda-figures-in-airstrike-in-syria.php.

- **June 12, 2020:** HaD forms a new operations room alongside four other small, hardline militant groups in Idlib.
  The new operations room is named "And Be Steadfast" and includes the previous HaD operations room "Incite the Believers." Source: Elizabeth Tsurkiv, Twitter Post, June 12, 2020, 2:58pm, https://twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1271517276307697668.

- **December 22, 2019:** A U.S. airstrike in northern Syria targets and kills Bilal Khuraysat.

Source: "Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor (JTTM) Weekend Summary: December 21-28, 2019," MEMRI, December 28, 2019, https://www.memri.org/reports/jihad-and-terrorism-threat-monitor-jttm-weekend-summary-december-21-28-2019.

- **October 27, 2019:** Members of HaD are killed during the U.S. raid that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Idlib.
Source: Martin Chulov, "Nowhere Left to Run: How the US Finally Caught Up with Isis Leader Baghdadi," *Guardian* (London), October 27, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/27/nowhere-left-to-run-how-the-us-finally-caught-up-with-isis-leader-baghdadi.

- **September 10, 2019:** The U.S. Department of State designates HaD and former HaD leader Faruq al-Suri as Specially Designated Global Terrorists and offers a $5 million reward for information leading to his arrest.
Sources: "Designation of Hurras al-Din as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist," U.S. Department of State, September 19, 2019, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/09/19/2019-20251/designation-of-hurras-al-din-as-a-specially-designated-global-terrorist; "Designation of Faruq al-Suri as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist," U.S. Department of State, September 19, 2019, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/09/19/2019-20277/designation-of-faruq-al-suri-as-a-specially-designated-global-terrorist; "Wanted: Faruq al-Suri," U.S. Department of Justice, September 10, 2019, https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/faruq_al_suri.html.

- **August 31, 2019:** U.S. missiles strike a building in Idlib that HaD and Ansar al-Tawhid were allegedly using as a training camp.
As many as 40 militants are killed.Source: "Syria's War: US 'Targets al-Qaeda Leaders' in Rebel-Held Idlib," Al Jazeera, September 1, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/syria-war-targets-al-qaeda-leaders-rebel-held-idlib-190831185353770.html.

- **August 22, 2019:** Abu Khalad al-Muhandis, a senior HaD figure, is assassinated in Idlib city by unknown assailants using a car bomb.
Source: Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda Veteran Reportedly Killed in Idlib," Long War Journal, August 22, 2019, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/08/al-qaeda-veteran-reportedly-killed-in-idlib.php.

- **June 30, 2019:** The U.S. strikes a building in southwest Aleppo in which HaD commanders were meeting attempting to resolve internal disputes.
Six commanders are killed, including one of the group's judges, Abou Omar al-Tunsi, and senior leaders Abu Thar al-Masri, Abu Yahia al-Jaza'aeri, and Abu Dujanah al-Tunissi. Fourteen HaD members are wounded. The killed commanders come from Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, and Syria.Sources: "Statement from U.S. Central Command on Strike against al-Qaida in Syria," U.S. Central Command, June 30, 2019, https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/1891697/statement-from-us-central-command-on-strike-against-al-qaida-in-syria/; "About 8 Persons Mostly Commanders of Non-Syrian Nationalities Were Killed in Aerial Bombardment Believed to Be Caused by the International Coalition Warplanes That Targeted a Headquarters of Hurras Al-Din Organization in the 'Putin–Erdogan' Area," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, July 1, 2019, http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=133022; "Hurras al-Din Hit by International Coalition Strike," Syrian Observer, July 2, 2019, https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/51448/hurras-al-din-hit-by-international-coalition-strike.html; "Hardliner Wing of 'Hurras al-Din' Loses Its Most Influential Figures," Enab Baladi, July 4, 2018, https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2019/07/hardliner-wing-of-guardians-of-religion-loses-its-most-influential-figures/#ixzz65J3MS9o5.

- **March 14, 2019:** HaD releases a one-page statement praising the Taliban's recent suicide attacks against U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan.
Source: Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda-Linked Group in Syria Praises Taliban, Shabaab Operations," Long War Journal, March 14, 2019, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/03/al-qaeda-linked-group-in-syria-praises-taliban-shabaab-operations.php.

- **December 28, 2018:** Senior HaD figure and veteran al-Qaeda member Iyad Nazmi Salih Khalil is reportedly killed in Dara'a.
The circumstances of his death and his exact role within HaD are unclear.Source: Thomas Joscelyn. "Jihadis Claim US-Designated Terrorist Killed in Syria," Long War Journal, December 29, 2018, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/12/jihadis-claim-us-designated-terrorist-killed-in-syria.php.

- **October 14, 2018:** Under a negotiated deal between Turkey and Russia, Turkey agrees to create a demilitarized zone in Idlib from which HaD and other armed groups will withdraw.
In exchange, Russia agrees not to launch an offensive with Syrian forces in Idlib against HTS forces. HaD rejects the proposal.Sources: Suhail AlGhazi, Twitter post, October 14, 2018, 1:30 p.m., https://twitter.com/putintintin1/status/1051525565889597440; Mariya Petkova, "After the Sochi Agreement, HTS Is Facing Internal Divisions," Al Jazeera, September 27, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/turkey-idlib-180924191442969.html.

- HaD allies with HTS and pro–al-Qaeda groups Ansar al-Din and Jamaat Ansar al-Islam to form the Incite the Believers (*Wa-Hardh al-Muminin*) Operations Room.
Sources: Aaron Y. Zelin, "Huras al-Din: The Overlooked al-Qaeda Group in Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 24, 2019, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/huras-al-din-the-overlooked-al-qaeda-group-in-syria; "Military Groups Calling Themselves 'The Finest Factions of the Levant' Form Joint Operations Room," Syria Call, October 15, 2018, http://nedaa-sy.com/en/news/9078.

- **April 28, 2018:** ISIS accuses HaD of apostasy (*takfir*) in an issue of *Naba*, its official magazine.
Source: Aaron Y. Zelin, Twitter post, April 28, 2018, 9:24 a.m., https://twitter.com/azelin/status/990220086656077824.

- HaD allies with the ex-ISIS faction Ansar al-Tawhid to form the Hilf Nusrat al-Islam operations room.
Source: Aaron Y. Zelin, "Huras al-Din: The Overlooked al-Qaeda Group in Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 24, 2019, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/huras-al-din-the-overlooked-al-qaeda-group-in-syria.

- **February 28, 2018:** Jaysh al-Malahim, Jaysh al-Badiya, Jaysh al-Sahel, Saraya al-Sahel, Saraya Kabul, Jund al-Sharqiya, and remnants of Jund al-Aqsa unite to form Hurras al-Din as an explicitly pro–al-Qaeda militant faction in Syria under the command of Samir Hijazi.
Sources: Tore Refslund Hamming and Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "The True Story of al-Qaeda's Demise and Resurgence in Syria," Lawfare, April 8, 2018, https://lawfareblog.com/true-story-al-qaedas-demise-and-resurgence-syria; Josko Baric, "Syrian War Daily – 28th of February 2018," Syrian War Daily, https://syrianwardaily.com/2018/02/28/syrian-war-daily-28th-of-february-2018/.

Hurras al-Din

Violent history:

- **August 4, 2021:** HaD releases a statement claiming responsibility for a bus explosion that occurred on the same day in Damascus, Syria. The group claims the explosion, targeted a bus which was carrying members of the Syrian Republican Guard. Although the Syrian government claims the explosion was caused by a "short circuit," HaD claimed the bombing was revenge for President Bashar al-Assad's actions in Daraa, a city in southwestern Syria. The driver of the bus was killed and three others were injured in the explosion.[41]
- **June 24, 2020:** HaD and Ansar al-Tawhid jihadists of the "Be Steadfast" Operations Room—a coalition of jihadist groups aligned with al-Qaeda—ambush HTS militants on the western outskirts of Idlib city. According to media reports, the jihadist groups managed to capture a number of locations, including the Idlib Central Prison. Al-Qaeda later issued a statement condemning the fighting between the groups and urged the members to rather focus on the "revolution" in Syria. Following the statement, "Be Steadfast" agrees to meet with HTS to negotiate a ceasefire which HTS declines.[42]
- **June 22, 2020 – June 27, 2020:** HaD forces mobilize in their stronghold of Abu Said, Idlib, after HTS arrests a senior figure from the HaD-led military coalition. HTS forces engage in a five-day battle ultimately defeating HaD members who are either killed, surrender, or disperse into small cells in hiding across rural parts of Idlib.[43]
- **June 10, 2020:** HaD militants take part in a second attack on Tanjarah, breifly seizing it and a neighboring town before being forced to retreat by Russian jets.[44]
- **May 10, 2020:** HaD militants attack a Syrian regime garrison in Tanjarah, northwest Hama, killing at least 18 soldiers and temporarily seizing control of the town.[45]
- **March 20, 2020:** The Syrian opposition website Zaman al-Wasl accuses HaD of targeting a Turkish military patrol in Idlib with an IED, killing two Turkish soldiers. HaD does not claim responsibility.[46]
- **March 19, 2020:** Syrian activists accuse HaD of kidnapping and imprisoning at least six local aid workers in the first three months of 2020.[47]
- **May 14, 2019:** HaD militants participate in a raid on Syrian regime positions in Latakia, killing several soldiers.[48]
- **April 2019:** HaD launches a series of attacks against Syrian regime forces in Hama, Latakia, and Aleppo, claiming to kill 30 and wound 17 in response to peace talks.[49]
- **November 18, 2018:** HaD militants raid Syrian regime positions in Tal Alloush, Aleppo.[50]
- **November 16, 2018:** HaD militants raid Syrian regime positions in Jabal Akrad, Latakia province, killing 18 soldiers.[51]
- **August 3, 2018:** HaD militants raid Syrian regime positions in Jurin, Hama province, using mortars and heavy machine guns.[52]
- **July 9, 2018:** HaD militants kill seven Syrian regime soldiers in a raid on Tel Bizam, Hama province.[53]
- **June 5, 2018:** HaD attacks Syrian regime forces in Tell Sultan, Idlib province, alongside HTS.[54]
- **April 26, 2018:** HaD seizes several Syrian regime positions in al-Hamamiyat, Hama province, alongside Ansar al-Tawhid and Jaish al-Izza.[55]

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Hurras al-Din

Designations:

Designations by U.S. Government:

- **September 10, 2019:** The Department of State designates Hurras al-Din as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.[56]

Designations by Foreign Governments and Organizations:

- **May 30, 2022:** The Council of the European Union adds Hurras al-Din, as well as HaD leader Faruq al-Suri and religious leader Sami al-Oraidi to the EU sanctions list.[57]

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56 "Designation of Hurras al-Din as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist," U.S. Department of State, September 19, 2019, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/09/19/2019-20251/designation-of-hurras-al-din-as-a-specially-designated-global-terrorist.

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Associations:
Ties to Extremist Entities:

- **Al-Qaeda**

  HaD is explicitly loyal to al-Qaeda and the U.S. government considers it part of al-Qaeda in Syria.[58] HaD leaders and rank and file repeatedly make statements reiterating their support for both the Taliban and al-Qaeda.[59] Furthermore, HaD views al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri as its "defining authority."[60]

  HaD's leadership has close ties to al-Qaeda. HaD's current leader, Khaled al-Aruri, is a long-time al-Qaeda member, released from an Iranian jail in a prisoner swap with AQAP.[61] HaD shura council members Iyad Nazmi Salih Khalil (now deceased), Sami al-Oraidi, Bilal Khuraysat (now deceased), and Faraj Ahmad Nana'a are also all veteran members of al-Qaeda.[62]
- **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham**

  HaD's core leadership and fighters are comprised of defectors from the former Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate the Nusra Front, now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).[63] The two groups have a contentious relationship, often hurling accusations at one another while also cooperating on the battlefield. According to interviews carried out by Syria expert Aymenn al-Tamimi, HaD's disputes with HTS are largely at the leadership level and center on HTS's disavowal of al-Qaeda and HaD's loyalty to al-Qaeda.[64]

  On November 27, 2017, Nusra Front leader Abu Mohammad al-Golani ordered the arrests of Sami al-Oraidi, the former head of the group's Sharia Council; Abu Julaibib al-Urduni, former Nusra Dara'a commander; Iyad Nazmi Salih Khalil, former Jabhat Fateh al-Sham commander; Abu Khadija al-Urduni; and Abu Mussaab al-Libi. All four were prominent Nusra leaders with strong ties to al-Qaeda.[65] Following these arrests, several members of HTS, the current incarnation of the Nusra Front, resigned, and several large factions threatened to break away, prompting Golani to renew negotiations with al-Qaeda that ultimately led nowhere.[66] On December 4, 2017, HTS released Urduni in a bid to ease tensions within the group. Urduni immediately renewed his pledge to al-Qaeda upon release.[67]

  Subsequently, several subgroups of devoted al-Qaeda supporters defected from HTS. On December 5, 2017, HTS faction Jaish al-Badia defected, creating a new Telegram channel devoted to al-Qaeda.[68] Jaish al-Malahem followed three weeks later, also indicating support for al-Qaeda in its new Telegram channel, while on February 7, 2018, a new al-Qaeda-supporting group, Jund al Shariah, announced its formation.[69] On February 28, 2018, these three groups, along with three other small militant factions, announced a merger under the name Hurras al-Din, or Guardians of the Religion, and declared themselves an unofficial affiliate of al-Qaeda.[70] Oraidi and Urduni both joined HaD's Shura council and have reportedly begun talks with al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to make HaD the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. HaD remains at odds with HTS.[71]

  Despite this severe ideological divide, the two groups formed a joint operations room in October 2018.[72] HTS and HaD militants use this room to conduct offensive and defensive military actions against Syrian regime forces in Latakia, Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo.[73]
- **ISIS**

  There has been much debate about the nature of the HaD-ISIS relationship following the U.S. killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[74] The *New York Times*' Rukmini Callimachi claimed to have received receipts proving that ISIS paid HaD for the explicit purpose of harboring Baghdadi in Idlib.[75] If so, the al-Qaeda affiliated group cooperated with ISIS, the terrorist organization famously denounced by al-Qaeda in February 2014.[76] Aymenn al-Tamimi, the premier expert on ISIS documents, was allowed to assess half of the documents used by the *Times* and raised serious issues regarding the legitimacy of the receipts, stating that there were glaring problems with basic naming and format conventions that would not appear in any real ISIS document.[77] Rather, it appears that a former HaD senior figure, Abu Mohammed al-Halabi, had harbored Baghdadi himself after being expelled from HaD for his pro-ISIS sympathies. HaD regularly conducts anti-ISIS operations within Idlib alongside HTS.[78]

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[63] *The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*, International Crisis Group, March 14, 2019, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/197-the-best-of-bad-options%20.pdf.

[64] Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Hurras al-Din: Interview," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's blog, July 11, 2019, http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/07/hurras-al-din-interview.

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Hurras al-Din

Rhetoric:

Sami al-Oraidi, May 24, 2020

"Dealing with the infidels, whether in the times of peace or times of war, has to be controlled by sharia orders and the absolute devotion to Allah, and to be under supervision of scholars and pious experts who are familiar with the criminals' approaches, so that people will not resort to the enemies or obey infidels. Obeying infidels never brings good."[79]

Hurras al-Din member, July 2019

"[Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham] have left the amirship of the learned hafiz sheikh al-Zawahiri (may God protect him). They broke their allegiance to the organization. And we did not come to Syria to be independent or break a pact and covenant."[80]

Official Hurras al-Din release, March 2019

"In the past few days…the soldiers of God in Afghanistan [Taliban]…killed more than 350 crusaders [U.S. coalition forces] and apostates [Afghan security forces] in a major breakthrough…with their blood [the Taliban] took revenge for the violation and desecration of sanctities."[81]

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79 "Commander and general sharia official in al-Qaeda-affiliated "Hurras al-Din" warns jihadi groups of being subject to "international understandings"," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=166281.

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